

AFRICAN ART

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FIGURES



(Fig.1)



(Fig.2)



(Fig.3)

Fig. 1. Early Terracotta head, from William Fagg, "On The Nature of African Art." Africa a Handbook to the Continent. Ed Colin Legum. (New York: Praeger, 1966).

Fig. 2. Head-dress for a play, c. 1910 (Fagg, W.).

Fig. 3. Construction of cane and wood for the funeral of a chief, c. 1900 (Fagg, W.).

INTRODUCTION

What is African art? It can be the cool, serene realism of a bronze statue from Ife, (Fig.1), the ludic surrealism of a carved wooden fertility figure (Fig.2), or the stark horror in the cubistic construction of a chief's funeral screen or duen fobara as it is called (Fig.3). African art can be the wild patterns and vivid colors of an Akete embroidery (Fig.4), or the simple texture on a mud pot (No figure). It can be all of these things because in Africa, art is a way of life.¹



Fig. 4. Embroidered "Akete cloth", Nupe, Nigeria. Advertisement; Craft Caravan.

Like any culture, the people of sub-Saharan East and Central Africa have many forms forms of artistic expression. Ranging in time from before the first European colonizations in the 1400's back to before there was any other race of man on earth, the artforms of Africa had developed into a deeply significant aspect of life. As expressions of the African world view, art permeated every aspect of life in the forms of dance, music, poetry, weaving, pottery, sculpture and painting. This wasn't just for fun, either. It concerned birth, life and life after death, sexual fertility and fertility of the soil. The main topic of African art is survival and it was the African way of attempting to control fate.

To understand this significance, we must realize that by comparison, European and Asiatic arts are largely documentary abstractions, matters of ^{RECORD} documentation. African art covers such a broad range of natural and supernatural phenomena and has such a direct interaction with African spiritual life, it is easier to distinguish where the arts of Europe or Asia fit within the realm of Africa rather than the other way around.²

It does not live in frames hung on the wall. It is at work decorating surfaces of most of the household items in the traditional African home -- pots, utensils, furniture and clothing. "In pre colonial Africa there was no visual art at all except for decorative work on useful objects? The only depictive art existed on useful flat objects such as tables, embroiderings and doors. (Fagg 384)

This being the case, then why do we call it art at all? The answer lies in the African concept of what makes an item useful and, of course, our western concept of what makes art.

Carved wooden masks, for example, are one of the single most repeated of the known forms of African art, yet the only walls they are found to adorn are those of the shop or stall where they are sold. They are not decorative by any means. A mask may have vivid patterns of bright colors and it may have carving so sensitive and articulate that by western standards it is high art, but by the standards of its maker, it is simply a thing exceptionally well suited to its purpose. ³ 3

WORLD VIEW

To the African outlook, art can only be of secondary value in comparison to the object it adorns. Decoration can greatly enhance an object such as a stool or a comb but can not over-shadow the item in importance, for it is the object, no matter what it might be, that is believed to house magic power.

To the African, objects have a spirit-like force much like that which people are believed to have. Masks and dolls may be seen as real beings in much the same way that children everywhere believe such things to be real. Far from being unsophisticated, this belief holds as true that all physical things have this unseen power and that this power is subject to fluctuation.⁴ Every object has a limit to its capacity for power, but one method of increasing its magic is through the process of decorating the article. If it is beautiful by our standards, it is more powerful by theirs. The artwork can also be thought of as clothing on the body of an item, which adds esteem to it.

To the head of an African household, it is very important that all possessions contain as much magic as possible, because that force benefits the owner. With more power on hand, he is more tolerant to the bad forces which manifest in the forms of sickness and other misfortunes. Therefore, it is a matter of responsibility to own items with adequate decoration.⁶

In the United States, the unseen social value of brand names on products is a similar idea.⁴ We pay more for the comfort of having a product with a "name-brand"-- your assurance that the product will do an inherently better job for the task at hand, supposedly. If you buy generic items with no name or artwork then you might be viewed as "skimping".--- not

So it was with the household utensils and artifacts in Africa, but the advertising was much more graphic and the implications more far reaching, for the power that these items helped a person attain made him a more significant citizen in the world of the afterlife, maybe getting him closer to heaven. That is the ultimate selling point. ⁷

CHANGE

Of course, change is inevitable. Over the past 50 years Great Britain has extensively colonized Africa and the United States has extensively capitalised Africa, exposing it to western religious, social and economic values.⁵ This has changed the face of African culture, but by no means has it undermined its heritage. The spirit of modern advertising is readily accepted by the west African people, probably as a manifestation of the same ancient concept of exterior decoration enhancing value. In a radio advertisement, one particular brand of chocolate milk was touted to increase the consumer's power. "Ovaltine gives you power" said the ad. To us, This sounds slightly awkward, but to the modern African, the power associated with their purchases is still of primary concern.⁶ Tradition is remembered on contemporary labels of African beers(Fig.5). Several governments of the new African nations have become concerned over the extinction of traditional art and are trying to revive interest by commissioning carvers to produce traditional works for their government buildings. ((Mount 5) (Fig.6)

FIGURES



Fig. 5. Beer labels, from Michael Jackson, The World Guide to BEER

(Philadelphia; Prentice-Hall, 1977) 242.

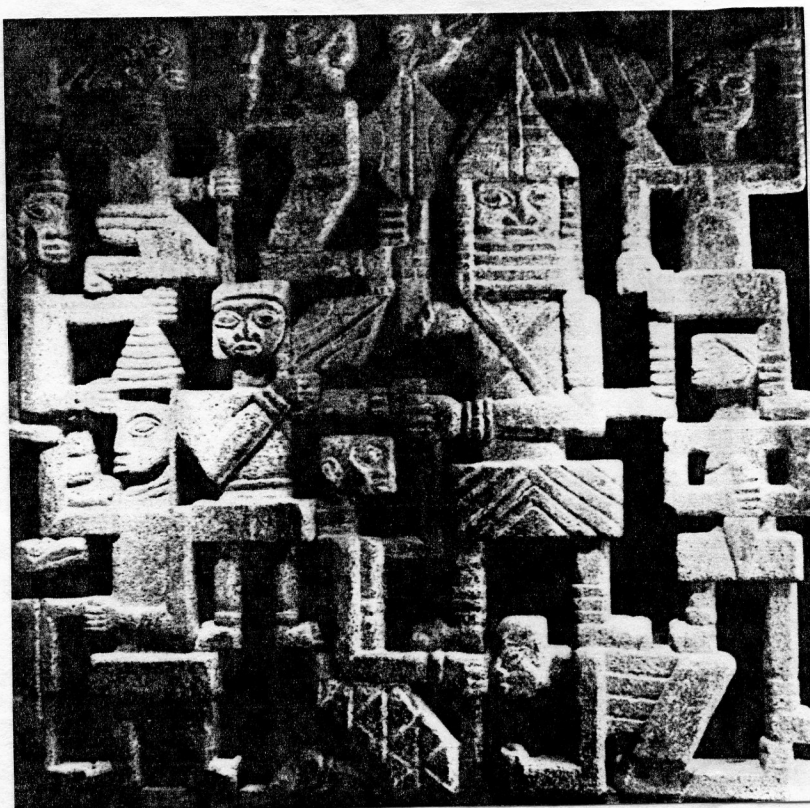


Fig. 6. Relief for Standard Bank of West Africa, Lagos, Nigeria,

African Art: The Years Since 1920 (Bloomington: Indiana University

press, 1973), 145

SUMMARY

Art became primitive man's small element of control of the forces underlying an unpredictable and volatile world. As the mysteries of Africa unravel, the need for this interaction with the spiritual world gradually decreases. The art of primitive Africa were statements as fleeting as a song or dance, leaving very little for posterity.⁷ What remains must be preserved. These relics may be our last link with the ascendant spirit of mankind.

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